

Separation

Murray Dineen

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EDITORIAL: SEPARATION

While I was conversing with a colleague from a Western university the other day, the topic came around to music departments (and by extension music schools and faculties). I noted that in some universities the disciplines of religious and pastoral studies are housed in separate administrative units—the case in my own university—and I wondered aloud if that were possible in music. Could academic music studies (the study of music from a humanistic or social science perspective—musicology and music theory, ethnomusicology, music perception, and so forth) survive on its own, with its own exclusive student clientele, its own degrees, and a professoriate devoted solely to the objective study of music? My colleague replied that in most departments of music academics and performance are already given their own separate directors and their own degree designations (BA versus BMus, for example). “So what would you achieve by an administrative separation?” Giving that question some thought, I arrived at the following speculations.

The marriage of music performance with academic studies has a long and, like many marriages, not thoroughly peaceable history. Over the years (and perhaps from its very origin), the union tended to favour one partner. For example, unlike colleagues in art history, who are seldom pressed into studio courses during their training, or colleagues in literary studies, who are seldom exposed to creative writing, professors of music with no university training in performance are exceptional. Accordingly, from the very beginning, performance is institutionalized—often unquestionably—in the mind of the academic student.

Academics are seen often as a supplement to performance—“nuts and bolts,” as one of my professors put it many years ago, putting the emphasis on performance: “You can’t talk about music without having music to talk about first, and for that you need performance, and so musical performance always comes first—both in time and importance.” I went away wondering why students in literary studies weren’t being taught elocution (and then put the question out of mind until I discovered Jacques Derrida). And I wonder now if another colleague, an expert in Northern European pagan religious traditions in the first millennium, isn’t covertly up to something else when he burns the burgers on his barbeque. Over the years, it has become less and less clear to me what the performance of music has to do with the academic study of music, let alone why the one is traditionally given priority over the other. But then, that’s marriage.

The apparently inextricable presence of performance in music departments keeps music academics largely as outsiders in the university community, perhaps much as couples in difficult relationships become estranged from their communities. I am a member of an interdisciplinary reading group on aesthetics, and I find it puzzling how the group becomes silent whenever the readings come

around to music: there is a tacit understanding that, since they are not performers, they are interlopers, amateurs, dilettantes, as if by association with performance I have a special insight that they might lack. Nothing is more frustrating for me, since these experts in their own fields could tell me so much about music from their own perspectives, but no, they always defer to me. I feel as if I've been living with a person about whom secrets are whispered behind my back, and I long to say, "No, our relationship, it's really not like that." But then, perhaps it is.

This feeling of outsider status is aggravated by a performance faculty with little or no training in humanistic music studies, apart from "nuts and bolts." Academics study performance, but rare is the performer with a credential in advanced academic research. When talk comes around to non-performance issues, I find the blank stares, the distracting chatter in faculty meetings, the looks of disbelief when sophisticated issues of analysis or theoretical framework that arise among my performance colleagues all betray a lack of interest in the work I do. It seems as if my growing enthusiasms are meeting with a growing disinterest from my colleagues, and I wonder if there was interest there to begin with. But this is a marriage isn't it? "Pluto's not a planet anymore either," as Randy Newman puts it.

If my colleague and I did not agree on the legitimacy of separate academic units, we did agree on a division of labour that seems to have wormed its way into the relationship over the years: academics all too often clean house, while performers play. Academics often present the administrative face of the department (through committee work, for example) to the university—since they understand the way the university at large works better than do performers, who may not have advanced university training, and since, after all, academics are used to pushing paper. Performers present the artistic face of the department, endearing it to both the university and the lay community at large, and thus securing a benevolent support. This is well and good; the two complement each other, although to suggest that academics are more suited to pushing paper and attending committees is to misunderstand completely the lonely research work of the academic scholar. But there remains the nagging issue of the pupil-to-teacher ratio: performers work an expensive one-on-one, while academics have seen their ratios climb, as administrators try to justify departmental expenditures. But in a marriage there are always inequities that even out over time. Are there not? Hunh?

Somewhere along the line, the nuts and bolts have become loosened. It could be a new brand of young academic who flirts with repertoires not played by her performance colleagues—jazz, popular music, early music as played on original instruments. Some academics have been caught discussing French theory with friends in literary studies. And they return, bringing these nutty foreign ideas into their classrooms, thereby distracting students from the study of real music—the Dixie Chicks are taking the place of Dittersdorf. There have been angry confrontations over the table at faculty meetings—these in front of student representatives, no less.

Performance colleagues complain. Performance students are required to take more and more specialized and laborious courses, to the detriment of

their recitals—courses that have nothing to do with classical music. Respect is disappearing. Academics are less and less willing to cover the administrative tasks they were best at, show up less and less to give support to their performance colleagues at faculty concerts, and are absent more and more frequently, with the excuse of attending conferences or doing research in foreign locales.

And academic colleagues complain too. Performance students are more and more fractious, reluctant (and less and less capable) in lectures and seminars, thus splitting the classroom, to the detriment of academic students. Academics have to go outside the department to find interesting conversations; performers are simply not interested in the new repertoires, whereas colleagues in anthropology or German studies are suddenly more than willing to talk about post-punk and music video as a medium of commodity fetish (where before they were so reluctant to talk about Mozart and Wagner). Perhaps it's time for some counselling.

Well, what about commitment? Is this marriage a part-time or full-time relationship? Many of the performers in music departments are content to be part-time employees of the university, as a supplement to a performance career. They will never receive tenure, the principles of which they often misunderstand, nor would they really want it, except as a sinecure that allows them to pursue a career outside. Academics are largely full-time professionals (and thus not employees), equal in status to the most senior administrator in the university and thus charged with the responsibilities of creating, regulating, and changing the institution as necessary. Rare is the part-time academic who doesn't covet a tenure position, one that will allow him to assume the full rights, and the responsibilities, of the profession.

Perhaps this marriage has reached an impasse in some situations (while no doubt it will continue to work well in others). With hot words and hotter tears, it has reached a stage too late for counselling. Perhaps it's time to acknowledge the split, and for one party to move out, taking some of the children with her.

It might be time to assume a really close live-in relationship with other departments in the humanities and social sciences—to put into practice, in lieu of the bachelor of music, a set of interdisciplinary undergraduate degrees where music combines with anthropology, communications, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, or even film or women's studies. It might be time for programs devoted entirely to dedicated young music scholars—no wide swaths of the class disappearing unannounced as the concert band goes on tour—where everyone is committed to the course and not merely taking it as a “degree requirement.” Perhaps the secretariat doesn't need to sell concert tickets or go berserk in March recital season. It would be nice if everyone around the table at a faculty meeting knew what “SSHRC” meant and gave an expert hand in preparing the document for the seven-year program review. Imagine a department in which all repertoires were studied, including the music your partner or your neighbour listens to. Imagine a department in which everyone dances. Imagine that, and you'll have come a long way, baby.